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The empty chair and its use in psychotherapy

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Abstract

The “empty chair” technique has been a foundation of psychotherapy for decades, with its origins tracing back to Fritz Perls and further developed by Edgar Stuntz. This article examines the multifaceted use of the empty chair, particularly within the framework of Transactional Analysis (TA). It explores the various ways therapists utilize the empty chair to facilitate structural analysis, rededication, parenting dynamics, and other therapeutic goals. Drawing insights from TA, Gestalt therapy, and cognitive-behavioral therapy, the author delves into the psychological processes associated with chair work, emphasizing the importance of regression and ego state integration. Additionally, the therapeutic implications of chair work are discussed, including its impact on self-understanding, diagnosis, and the therapeutic relationship. The article also indicates how chair work can be adapted to meet the needs of clients with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), highlighting its potential as a form of exposure therapy. The article provides a comprehensive review of the empty chair technique and its diverse applications in contemporary psychotherapeutic practice.

Keywords: Transactional Analysis, psychotherapy, ego states, gestalt.

Introduction

It has been fifty years since Edgar Stuntz (1973) presented his ground breaking paper on the “Multiple Chairs Technique”. He proposed this as useful in five ways – structural analysis, decontamination, rededication, parenting and relationship analysis. In the basic multiple chair technique the client cathects the Parent

ego state (P), Adult ego state (A) and Child ego state (C) in the appropriate chair as shown in diagram 1. The therapist (T) sits opposite the Adult chair and teaches the client how to dialogue from each ego state on a particular issue.

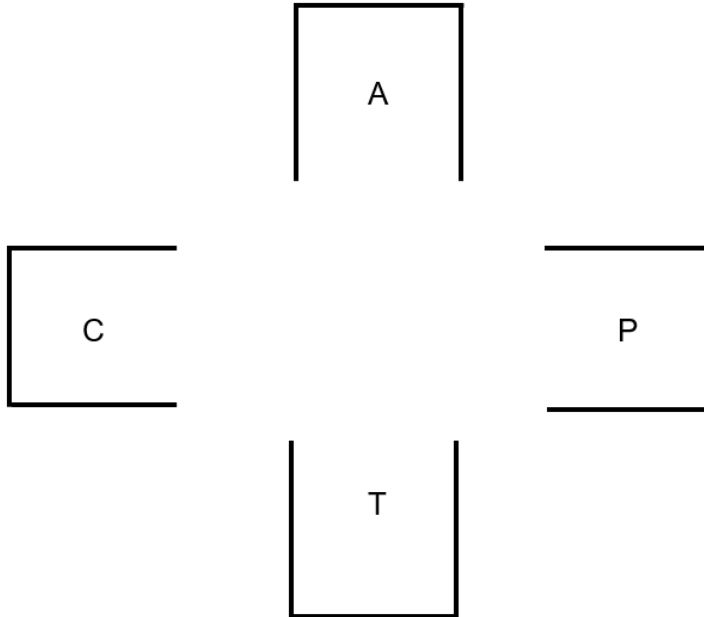


Diagram 1
Seating Diagram 3-Chair Technique (Stuntz, 1973, p. 29)

Empty chair work is one of those things in psychotherapy that many have adopted and used over the years such that it becomes hard to follow its path of use and development. Generally Fritz Perls is noted as one of the originators of this technique and then many have used it and developed it in the ways they see fit. An example of this is Kellogg and Garcia Torres (2021) who talk about four different types of chair work with the first being “Giving voice”. This can involve asking the patient to sit, “...in the centre chair, which is a place for the inner leader or healthy adult mode.” (p. 172). Then the client is asked to move to another chair and express their suffering and pain (which is the Child ego state chair). As you can see this is basically a restatement of what Stuntz proposed 50 years ago in diagram 1, and they even use the words ‘adult mode’ which is interesting as it is exactly the same as what the Adult ego state does in the Stuntz exercise. The point here being that many of these different approaches have occurred relatively simultaneously or at least in different disciples of psychology along their own paths sometimes without, at times, an awareness of some of the others.

Approaches like schema therapy (Young, Kiosk and Weishaar (2003)), cognitive behavioural therapy (Goldfried (2006) and Burns (2006)) and emotion focussed therapy (Watson, Goldman and Greenberg (2007)) have all developed and used chair work and the empty chair in various ways in psychotherapy. Some of these are evidence based therapies so they have substantial research evidence to support their efficacy and success.

From a transactional analysis point of view, around the same time as Stuntz was writing about chair work James and Jongeward (1971) discussed at some length the Gestalt practices of Fritz Perls and how these related to transactional analysis. In particular they talk about his therapeutic use of the empty chair. A lot of this was focussed on the fragmented parts of the client and how to begin dialogue between this fragmented part and the other parts of the personality. These were some of the first attempts at making a combination between gestalt therapy and transactional analysis as a therapy approach.

Of course this was followed a little later by the work of Goulding and Goulding (1978) who fully embraced this process of combining gestalt practises with transactional analysis and indeed titled their first book – *The Power is in the Patient: A TA/Gestalt Approach to Psychotherapy*. Out of this evolved redecision therapy where the gestalt practice of chair work was at the very core of the redecision therapy process. By adding in the gestalt it allowed the Gouldings to combine the cognitive of transactional analysis with the emotional of gestalt therapy chair work. The Child and the Adult ego states were truly the focus of the redecision psychotherapy approach.

The empty chair

It pays to remind oneself from time to time that the empty chair is actually empty, because it appears very quickly to the client that the empty chair does not feel empty at all. People quite quickly will enter into the empty chair process and feel at times strong emotions. The empty chair can quite quickly become emotionally important to the individual. So what is in the empty chair?

In the literature one gets a variety of answers to this question. Some like Widdowson (2010) talk about “mentally imagine seeing the parent in front of them.” (p. 315–316)., In this instance it’s seen as a process of imagination. Alternatively Kellogg and Garcia Torres (2021) state the client is invited to “have an imaginal encounter with someone from the past.” (p. 171). Again they highlight the idea of imagination but also say it is an encounter in some way. James and Jongeward (1971) talk about the client role playing the person in the empty chair which is different to the idea of imagination. At other times client’s are told to remember how their mother was and be that. This is saying the empty

chair is a memory of the other person that one has. Erskine (1997) says that in two chair work the client is asked to become the other person. In this case the empty chair is seen to include the person who the client has 'become'. As we can see, in the literature there is a variety of views about what the client puts in the empty chair.

However a significant portion of the literature will claim that their use of empty chair work comes from the work of Fritz Perls who popularised the technique, Perls (1969, 1975). Perls used this technique for a variety of different reasons including: for the integration of disowned parts of self, working with polarities, working with dreams, to explore parts of self, to finish unfinished business and to say 'goodbye' to a person. In chair work what Perls (1975) usually was talking about was the mechanism of projection and it is this that is at the core of empty chair work. Tilney (1998) also suggests this idea in chair work when he states that, "the client agrees to project an internal structure such as an introject or an ego state" (p. 23). Therefore in most chair work one is not remembering or imagining or 'becoming' something, instead the person is reliving a part of self that is projected onto the chair. McNeel (1976) also states in discussing chair work, "...the person switches chairs and plays the parental projection.." (p. 62). This is not completely accurate. Yes the chair contains a parental projection by the client but one cannot 'play' a projection, one can only 'be' a projection of themselves. This is supported by Goulding and Goulding (1978) who propose, "The patient, as he relives an old scene in which he is stuck, gets together the memory with the affect, and begins to relive the scene." (p. 198). The key word here is 'reliving'. It's not just a memory, it's not a role play, it is not imagination, instead it is the person reliving a situation. What this means is the person has put part of themselves in the empty chair, part of their own personality. What one can put in an empty chair is part of self and that is usually done by the process of projection. In the empty chair (as done by Perls) there is only ever a projection of part of your own personality. This is illustrated in Diagram 2. As Eric Berne stated the Parent ego state includes tapes (introjections) of the mother and father as illustrated in the diagram. This tape then becomes part of the child's own personality. This part of their personality can then later be projected out onto an empty chair. The person sees in the empty chair, part of their own personality.

As time has shown, it was the Gouldings who were the first to take this chair work of Perls and modify it to form a core part of rededication therapy. McNeel (1975) did a doctoral thesis on a rededication therapy marathon done by the Goulding's where he observed them doing therapy over a weekend. He identified many different types of work the Goulding's did including two chair work and he states "Two-chair (TC). In the transcript there are literally dozens of examples of two-chair work by the Gouldings." (p. 125).

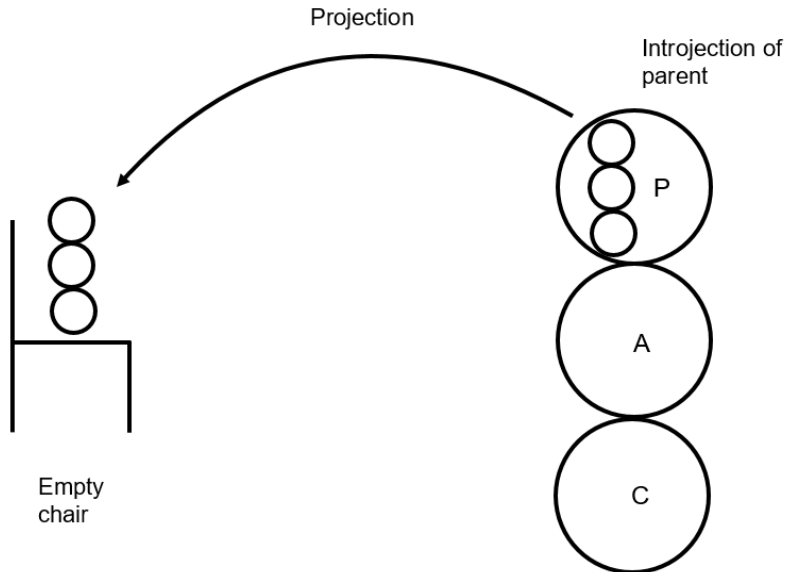


Diagram 2

Projection in empty chair work

Source: own materials.

Many things can be put in the empty chair, for example a person currently dead or alive, a pet, a headache, god, the government, an arm, cigarettes and so on. I have seen a person do empty chair work with an arm they had amputated in a car accident. Often I will ask a person who is wanting to stop smoking to see their cigarettes in the empty chair and dialogue with that. Of course when a person puts their cigarettes or pet snake in the chair what they are putting in the chair is a projection of part of self which they have put onto the animal or the cigarettes. One can only ever put part of their own self onto the empty chair because as I highlighted before the chair is empty, so everything in the chair has come out of the person's own head. However people can project part of themselves onto many different things as I have just shown, which can then subsequently be placed on the empty chair.

However the most common thing put into the empty chair is usually an ego state. As we know all people have a Critical Parent, Nurturing Parent, Adult, Adapted Child and Free Child ego state. In my observations over the years the vast majority of people can easily see these in an empty chair. Most people can quite easily project these parts of self onto a chair. Occasionally a person will refuse or say they can't but that is only a small group of people.

It is also possible to do empty chair work without a chair. Mahmood and Flax (2023) talk about different experiments one can do in gestalt therapy. They say

there is the empty chair experiment but there are also many other experiments that gestalt therapists use including “finding a voice for a particular part of the body” (p. 407). For example as a client is talking they have their legs crossed and one foot is doing a kicking motion. The therapist may then ask the client to exaggerate the kicking motion and let the foot talk. As the client talks for their foot they are simply doing empty chair work without the chair. The client is projecting part of self onto the foot rather than a chair and then talking. The same psychological process is occurring using their foot instead of a chair.

It is not uncommon for me to say to a client something like, “If your mother was here and you could tell her what you were angry about, what would you say?”. When the client responds and the catharsis begins, they have simply projected their mother introject out into the space in front of them rather than onto a chair. The client is doing two chair work without even knowing it. The same psychological process is occurring.

When working with the demon of the client White (2021) will invariably get the client to draw their demon on the white board in the office. Then he will ask the client to say what the demon is thinking and feeling and then talk to the drawing of the demon. Again the same psychological process is occurring as with two chair work except the client is projecting onto their drawing rather than a chair. Similarly, when working with trauma the client is often asked to draw the traumatic situation on the board or a piece of paper. Then they are asked to dialogue with that drawing so one is doing the same psychological process as they would be doing talking to an empty chair.

Regression and empty chair work

For empty chair work to be useful, the client must regress when they do the work, see diagram 3.

When people agree to the empty chair work most will be like shown in diagram 3a. In this case the person’s Adult ego state is usually well functioning and in charge of the personality. As they begin the exercise most people will have their Adult in executive control and be responding from that ego state. If they stay like this then the chair work will be ineffective as it will simply be an intellectual exercise for the client. As Goulding (1985) notes the Child ego state must be involved for the exercise to be of any use. The chair work must include the feelings of the Child ego state. The client has to regress as shown in diagram 3b and develop a large Child ego state for the chair work to be successful.

Fortunately, chair work for many people is an effective way to assist them to regress. The chair work helps them regress and for the chair work to be successful they must be regressed. That small group of people who refuse and say

they can't do chair work usually refuse for this reason. It is too scary for them to regress into their Child ego state feelings at that time, so they refuse or make up an excuse like they would feel too embarrassed talking to an empty chair. Their feelings in the Child are too overwhelming for them at that moment, so they refuse the chair work. This does however show one therapeutic use of such chair work, it assists people to get into their Child ego state and feelings. People who have trouble accessing their feelings and Child can use the empty chair exercise to achieve the goal of doing that.

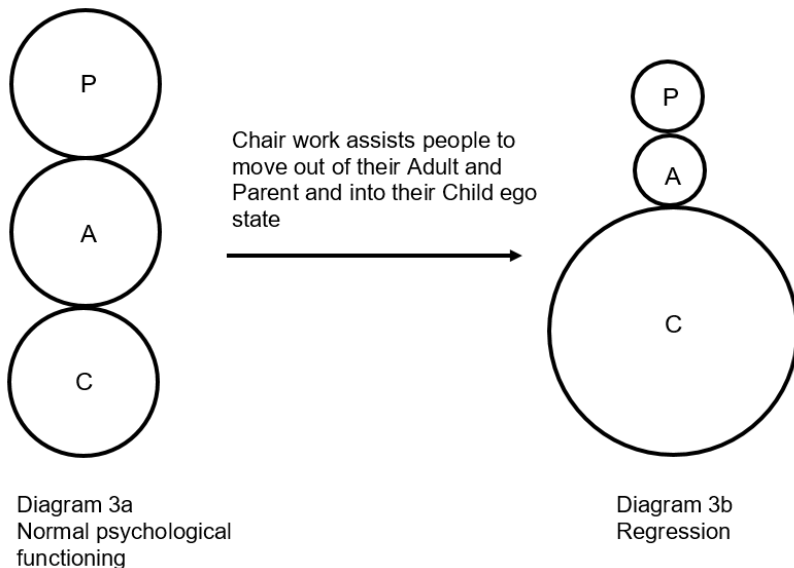


Diagram 3
Regression in empty chair work

Source: own materials.

Chair work and self understanding

As mentioned above people have a whole array of ego states which form part of their personality and they can place (project) any of these, such as the Critical Parent or Free Child ego states onto the empty chair. From my experience most people can do this quite easily especially after they have done it a few times before. With a bit of practice most people get very proficient at making such projections onto the chair. This is quite remarkable really as it allows the person to almost surgically dissect the personality and project each specific part out in front of them.

It allows for people to begin to understand themselves at a deep experiential level. Not only do they understand self in an intellectual way but they get a first hand phenomenological understanding of self. As mentioned before, in the empty chair the person is not remembering the past or role-playing self as a child they are instead reliving and experiencing that part of self now. They get a first hand experiential understanding of self. Each ego state represents a different part of the individual's personality so chair work allows them to get such a deep first hand experience of each of these intricate parts of their personality. Upon reflection this is quite an unusual situation where people are afforded a way to get an intensive experiential understanding of each part of self. Few people would ever achieve this in their lives without such chair work.

With techniques like game analysis, script analysis or the interpretation of enactments that occur in the therapeutic relationship, people are provided with largely an intellectual analytical understanding of self. The unconscious material that can be discovered by using such techniques tends to be largely an Adult ego state way of understanding self. Being afforded a way to intimately experience different parts of the personality firsthand allows for a deeper and more profound Child ego state understanding of self.

One can use the metaphor of a movie. One can read about a movie, the start, the plot, the ending, the various acting roles taken and the movie reviews. One can get a good Adult understanding of the movie. However if one goes to see the movie then the Child ego state is given an opportunity to have its full array of reactions to it and experience the movie. This affords a deeper and more profound understanding of the movie, what it is about, the message of it and so forth. Chair work with the ego states does the same. It allows the individual to achieve a more profound and deeper understanding of the various parts of their personality.

The same of course happens for the therapist. They get to see the various ego states of the client functioning first hand. The client may say they have a poorly functioning Nurturing Parent ego state, however when the client is in that chair the therapist may observe that the client functions quite well in that ego state and seems comfortable being that part of self. Or the client may report they have quite a weak functioning Child ego state. Yet when the client is being that ego state the therapist observes quite a vocal and demanding Child ego state. This can provide invaluable diagnostic information that is not otherwise available to the therapist, to see the client first hand rather than as only stated by the client.

Chair work, ego states and the therapy room

When chair work is used in essence a third entity (or person) is being brought into the therapy room. A third party is created as shown in diagram 4.

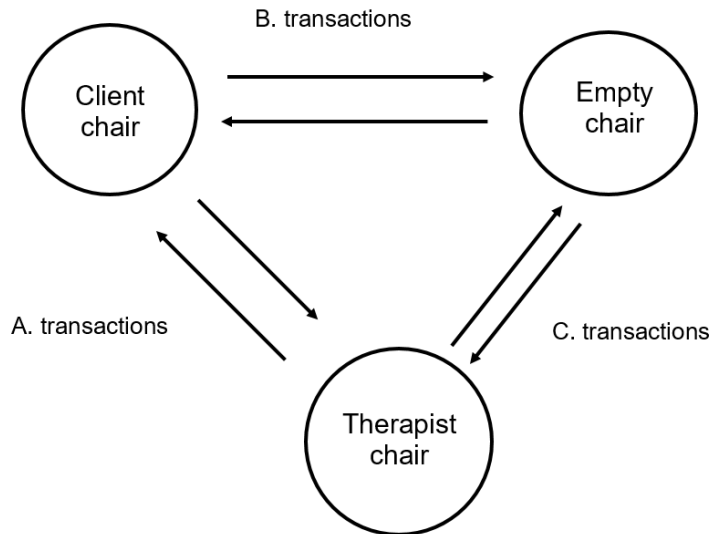


Diagram 4

Projection into chair creates a third 'person' in the room

Source: own materials.

Most often in therapy transactions occur between client and therapist as shown with A. transactions. When the empty chair is used this allows a whole other set of transactions to occur, (B. transactions) and this is useful in a number of ways, none less so than diagnostically as just stated. The therapist gets to see first hand how the various parts of the client's personality relate, cooperate, or disagree. This of course can provide useful diagnostic information to the therapist about the client. The therapist can simply observe how the various aspects of the client's personality function with each other. This gives the therapist a first hand view of the client rather than listening to the client talk about how they think the different aspects of self relate to each other. Without such chair work the therapist can only listen to the client's reports of how their Parent and Child ego states either cooperate or disagree.

However this introduction of the new entity into the therapy room also allows for C. transactions to occur. It gives the therapist the option to begin transacting with specific parts of the client's personality they have projected onto the empty chair. This has been mentioned before in the TA literature. McNeel (1975) in his observations of the Gouldings doing weekend redecision therapy group reports, "Talking to parent projections (TPP). During two-chair work the Gouldings would often talk to the person while he was playing his mother or father as if he were that person from the past. This technique is a powerful vehicle to introduce the person to the inner experiences of his parent." (p. 126). McNeel

(1976) later clarified this with a journal article on the Parent interview. He states, "At this point it is appropriate for the therapist to intervene with the parent interview. This technique consists of simply of talking to the parental projection as if she or he were that person. The most common stimulus to begin the interview is, 'What's your name, Mom?' or 'What's your name, Dad?'" (p. 66).

This idea of addressing and transacting with the 'third' person in the room has been taken further than just simple transactions with the projection as shown by McNeel. It also allows the therapist to develop a relationship with that part of the client. One can do this with any of the client's ego states but is especially important to do with the self destructive parts of the client. For example client's who feel suicidal, are self harming, may have an eating disorder, or indeed are dealing with the demon sub personality part of self. White has discussed this option of forming a relationship using C. transactions before on a number of occasions – White (2011, 2016, 2021).

White 2011 – "The counsellor begins to build a relationship with the self destructive part of the client, his Adapted Child. I cannot stress enough the importance of this. To make good relational contact with the self destructive part of the client is most therapeutic." (p. 211).

White 2016 – "However, what is more important, in the AC chair one has quite a unique therapeutic situation. In that chair the person has stripped away all aspects of the personality except for his own destructive urges. Sitting directly in front of the psychotherapist is the core of the destructiveness in the person, which is a very desirable circumstance to have. It allows the therapist to relate directly with that." (p. 181)

White 2021 – "Having said this if one can establish some kind of relational contact with the demon then it can begin to feel less like it is the naughty child who has been put in the 'time out' room of the personality.... After a few weeks or months there tends to be a pacifying effect... The demon experiences being related to directly by a sympathetic other which it finds quite unusual as it is not usually asked to be talked with. The effect seems to be like a small child who is being naughty because it is not getting any attention. When it starts to get attention it tends to become less naughty and does less attention seeking behaviour. It is pacified in this way." (p. 143).

As a way of dealing with the self destructive client this is a powerful option as it gives the therapist a way to establish a relationship with either the self destructive Adapted Child ego state in the chair or the demon sub personality in the chair. This can have positive therapeutic outcomes as reported by White. When people are afforded the option of entering a positive and sympathetic relationship with another then usually their general state of wellbeing increases.

This view has been held by many over the years but none less so than Carl Rogers (1961), the father of client entered therapy with the idea of uncondi-

tional positive regard for the client. If the therapist has this view of the client along with qualities like genuineness, transparency and a warm accepting empathetic relationship, then the client will naturally over time develop more acceptance of self, more self confidence, be more integrated and so forth. Their general state of psychological wellbeing will increase.

The empty chair gives the therapist the ability to isolate one particular part of the client's personality and then develop a relationship of unconditional positive regard with that. This could be seen to have a more concentrated effect on that part than if the therapist is reacting that way to the client in general. Obviously if one is dealing with a self destructive client then having a direct concentrated effect on that part specifically, is desirable.

The impact of chair work on the therapeutic relationship

Martha Stark (1999) writes about three different types of psychology or psychotherapy – one person psychology, one and a half person psychology and a two person psychology.

Chair work would be seen as one person psychotherapy that avoids the transference. It is a way of minimising the transference reactions of the client towards the therapist. As White (2021) notes therapies that are relationship based and focus on the transference relationship are more the two person psychology approach. The therapeutic field, or the client's sense of the therapy, where the therapy is seen to happen is shown by the rectangle around the ego states. The most obvious example of this in transactional analysis is the relational approach. Diagram 5 illustrates this.

Two person approaches tend to avoid techniques like two chair as they believe change is caused by the impact of the transference relationship on the client. The therapist encourages cathartic reactions about them and the relationship. The client is encouraged to focus on the relationship with things like enactments. The implication to the client is that we solve this together and you do not do it on your own. In this way it can be said that a sense of autonomy in the client is discouraged.

The use of empty chair work changes the therapy to a one person approach. (See diagram 6). The therapist and client don't focus on the transference relationship and enactments, instead the client's attention is moved away from that and onto their projection on the chair. This changes the client's experience of the therapy to one that is non relational and instead about something that exists within the client. This also implies to the client that change will come from them and them alone. The therapist or at least the relationship with the therapist is not involved in their change. The therapist helps the client get to the point of

change but ultimately it is the client's responsibility to take the final step and change, such as with a redecision. This can then result in an increased sense of autonomy by the client because they realise the change comes from them and them alone. This is what a one person psychology is.

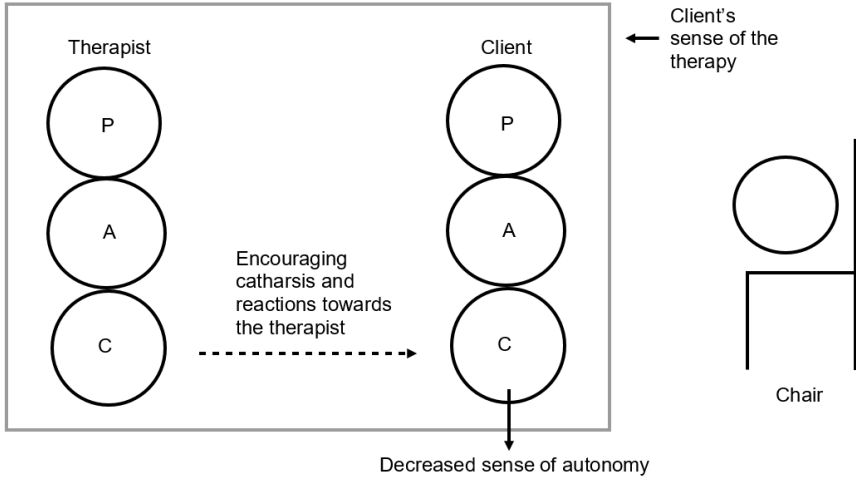


Diagram 5
Two person psychology
Source: own materials.

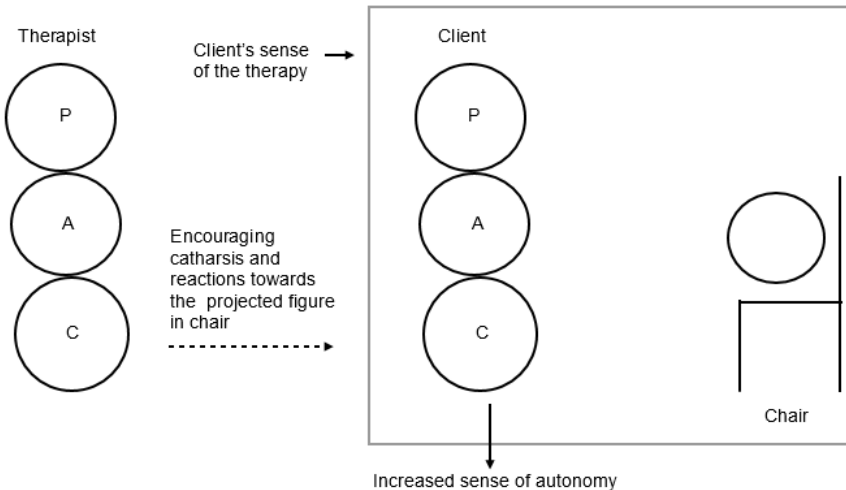


Diagram 6
One person psychology
Source: own materials.

This also illustrates a way to manage the transference with the client. By shifting from the approach in diagram 5 to the approach to diagram 6 one can effectively reduce the degree of transference the client experiences towards the therapist. One is encouraging the client to move their projections away from the therapist and onto the empty chair. In this way one can say there is not so much a reduction in transference but it is shifted off the therapist onto something else. The therapist can also move the therapy the other way from diagram 6 to diagram 5 for the opposite effect. So one can use both approaches in varying degrees at varying times, indeed this is what White (2021) calls a rededication relational approach to transactional analysis.

Chair work and flashbacks

Some chair work may involve flashbacks. A war veteran with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) who spontaneously has a flashback is spontaneously creating their own empty chair work without the chair. As White (2023) has shown using the chair work to create an early scene is encouraging the client into a psychological state that is similar to a flashback. When the client regresses into their Child ego state they begin to again relive the early trauma they are discussing. As highlighted before this involves not just remembering events but involves the experience of reliving the events which is one main feature of what is known as a flashback. The person experiencing a flashback feels like and believes they are currently back in the trauma and again reliving it. White goes on to say this means that such chair work can be used as a form of exposure therapy. The person is afforded the opportunity to reexperience the original trauma which provides a most potent form of interoceptive exposure which then forms part of the exposure therapy.

Conclusion

This article describes the origins and alternate ways that empty chair work has been used over the years. This includes a statement about what psychological processes are actually involved when a client engages in this therapeutic procedure. It seeks to define what is in the empty chair as many have proposed different explanations for this. This is followed by a description of the various ways that chair work can be used in psychotherapy for differing therapeutic goals. For instances such chair work can in one sense bring a third person into the therapy room and it can be used in that way by the client and the therapist for a number of differing reasons. Self understanding, diagnosis, regression and

a form of exposure therapy are all ways that chair work is discussed as a therapeutic technique in this article.

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Technika pustego krzesła I jego użycie w psychoterapii

Streszczenie

Technika pustego krzesła jest podstawą psychoterapii od dziesięcioleci, a jej początki sięgają Fritza Perlsa i były dalej rozwijane przez Edgara Stuntza. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje wieloaspektowe wykorzystanie pustego krzesła, szczególnie w ramach analizy transakcyjnej (AT). Bada różne sposoby, w jakie terapeuci wykorzystują puste krzesło, aby ułatwić analizę strukturalną, ponowną decyzję i dynamikę rodzicielstwa, a także inne cele terapeutyczne. Czerpiąc ze spostrzeżeń AT, terapii Gestalt i terapii poznawczo-behawioralnej, autor zagłębia się w procesy psychologiczne związane z pracą na krześle, podkreślając znaczenie regresji i integracji stanu ego. Ponadto omówiono terapeutyczne implikacje pracy w fotelu, w tym jej wpływ na samorozumienie, diagnozę i relację terapeutyczną. W artykule wskazano również, w jaki sposób praca na krześle może być dostosowana do potrzeb klientów z zespołem stresu pourazowego, podkreślając jej potencjał jako formy terapii ekspozycyjnej. Artykuł zawiera kompleksowy przegląd techniki pustego krzesła i jej różnorodnych zastosowań we współczesnej praktyce psychoterapeutycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: analiza transakcyjna, psychoterapia, stany Ja, Gestalt.